

## FESTIVALS AS EVENTIFYING SYSTEMS

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The arguments for the festivalisation of culture in the world today (Kaptein 1996) seem to suggest that the arts festival circuit may actually in some cases have come to represent the theatrical 'season' in certain countries (e.g. see the chapters on Iran and South Africa). Though appearing to be a splintered and diverse season made up of a series of cultural 'mini-bytes', the festivals *are* where plays, performances and other arts events are effectively launched and displayed for the public today. Slogans like 'As seen at the Melbourne Festival', 'Newly from the Edinburgh Festival' or 'The hit show of the Grahamstown Festival' have become a standard and effective part of marketing. In other words, festivals are not only where the work is; it is where the artistic output of the actor, director, choreographer, etc. is *eventified*<sup>1</sup>. It is where the everyday *life event*<sup>2</sup> (performing a play, a concerto, a dance, exhibiting a painting, a sculpture, an installation) is turned into a significant *Cultural Event*, framed and made meaningful by the presence of an audience and reviewers who will respond to the celebrated event. Festivals thus become a means of retaining the event in the cultural memory of the particular society.

### THE FESTIVALS AS EVENTIFICATIONS

However, there is also another, equally interesting, function which festivals fulfil in the broader society, based on what one might call the latent 'eventness' of festival itself as an entity – the festival as a *cultural event* which in its own way *eventifies* elements and issues of the particular society in which it is taking place. Considerable attention has lately been paid to festivals and pageants, particularly from this performance theory perspective, by researchers who look at the festivals *as performances* or as *theatrical events* in their own right. Such researchers tend to focus on the important and perhaps less conscious ideological imperatives lying behind particular festivals.<sup>3</sup> (See, for example, Staub 1992; Kruger 1999; Martin 2000; Merrington 1999).

One can also look at a number of the current festivals in this way. So, for example, by viewing them as *performances* in their own

right rather than merely as markets for a series of specific cultural events, some festivals may be seen as celebrating particular (historical or life) events or particular ideologies and ideas. They do so by framing the events/ideas in a *theatrical* way, in exactly the same way a play might do.



A Van der Stel Festival tableau. Local women dancing a folk-dance in traditional Afrikaners/Dutch dress, re-enact the arrival of the Dutch governor of the Cape, Simon van der Stel, in Stellenbosch to celebrate his birthday. This tableau is part of a weekend long festival celebrating the founding of the town in 1685, and takes place yearly on the "Braak", the Stellenbosch town common, to the enjoyment of the crowds visiting the stalls and tents surrounding the space. Photo by the author.

A good and relatively straightforward example of this process over the years has been the *Van der Stel Festival* in the small town of Stellenbosch, near Cape Town in South Africa. This festival utilises a formal public ball and an annual open-air pageant to re-enact the festivities on Simon van der Stel's birthday, when the 17th-century Dutch governor ostensibly visited the little hamlet named after him, and by re-enacting this visit annually the community celebrates the founding of Stellenbosch. The festival itself has no other specific purpose than that. However, though its outside trappings are those of any other festival (e.g. stalls, performances, eating drinking and promenading), over the years it has become a means of reconciliation, a festival shared by all the community, including the immigrant communities and the worker communities from the farms, etc.

## FESTIVALS AS (POLY-)SYSTEMS

There are a number of ‘myths’ that appear to govern so much of our idealism for arts and culture in South Africa? A key one is the myth of *one culture for all* (not the rather antiquated idea that there is some kind of ‘universal’ norm of what constitutes art and culture across the globe, but the notion that there can be a single cultural system in a country). A derivative of this would be a belief in the possibility of *one festival for all*. This myth has been very pervasive over the years and occurs in many countries and regions. It is however, either a perceived truth, or an aspired-for ideal.

In the first scenario we are looking at close-knit communities which are deemed to be *mono-cultural*, a society where it appears that everyone shares the same physical, social and economic environment and holds to the same value systems (i.e. the same intellectual, societal, religious, cultural and political beliefs). Seemingly obvious examples of this would be so-called pre-colonial societies (e.g. the Dakota, Sioux or Inuit in North America, the Inca in South America, the Zulu, Masai and San in Africa, the Celts, Huns and Vandals in Europe, and so on). More modern examples would most probably include peoples living in physically defined places like the Aran Islands, Sicily, Thailand, Tibet, Madagascar and Greenland, and specific communities in larger countries, like the Amish, or Hassidic Jews.

In the second scenario we refer to those nations or societies which are made up of diverse segments, and which strive for unity. The process usually involves the creation or construction and propagation of a sense of unity, a set of shared intellectual, societal, religious, cultural and political ceremonies and beliefs. The examples here are the more recent cases of colonisation, immigration, liberation and expansion, notably emerging nations such as Great Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the USA at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany in the 1930s, the USSR in the post-WWII period, Israel since independence, post-apartheid South Africa after 1994, Iran in the 1990s, and so on (a number of these are discussed in this book).

The fact is, of course, that virtually no society on earth *really* consists of one uniform and set system of societal processes and beliefs. The best one may find in isolated and homogenous societies is that their social system allows the individuals to share sufficient processes and values to make communication and communal life

relatively simple and – normally at least – unambiguous. However, for much of the world this is far removed from the reality of everyday life. Depending on one's definition of it, *multiculturalism* is – increasingly – a basic condition of nationhood in the vast majority of countries and any attempt to attain nationhood must deal with the complexities posed by a diverse population. So too must any festival seeking to express the 'soul' of the particular nation.

The fact is, no culture is a single system of processes and events, but really a complexity of sub-systems. More accurately perhaps one refer to it as a *poly-system*, using a term coined by Even-Zohar (1979) to refer to a mix of interlinked but distinctive (sub-) systems. Thus the social and political processes, structures and beliefs of one sub-system (e.g. of the Scots in Great Britain) may differ markedly from those of another sub-system (e.g. the English or Welsh).

Should we consider this notion with reference to our focus on festivals, it is clear there is also a sense in which any given festival may in actual fact *not* clearly and unambiguously constitute a single entity, one systemic whole, but something much more complex. While there may be a *conceptual* unity to the event as a whole (it has a specific name, takes place in one place, at a specific time, has one programme, and a very general marketing focus on a particular issue, culture, form of expression, etc.), yet within that frame it is more likely to be a *poly-system of linked sub-festivals*, each with its own aims, objectives, supporters, processes and impact - in other words an uneasy composite of (potentially) competing activities. And those involved in it have distinctive, and at times even widely divergent, motivations for being involved – since they too come from distinctive sub-systems and systems within the larger poly-system of the particular society. This a point well illustrated by many of the contributions in this volume.

This poly-systemic nature of the festival experience would appear to be a most crucial factor in the whole festivalisation process and its impact on society – particularly today in our mediated, global society. This not only helps one to understand the complex nature of modern-day festivals, but also to understand some of the difficulties facing any attempt at utilising the festival circuit or the specific festival for a socio-cultural purpose of any kind.

### THE POLITICS OF CULTURE (OR ‘WHO OWNS THE FESTIVAL?’)

It is clear from all the evidence that there are formidable constraints on the organisers of any festival, directly linked to the cultural politics and cultural economics of the festival. And naturally this may have a most decisive impact on the ability of the organisers (or anyone else) to use the festival in any concerted and coherent fashion to shape artistic and cultural identity.

In addition to the primary levels of complexity outlined in the previous sections, the same multifaceted social, cultural, political and economic poly-system identified above has a variety of dynamic forces impinging on it, driving it, shaping the particular (or individual) events, and ultimately vying for supremacy and ‘ownership’ of the festival as a whole. This may be illustrated with a simple diagram (Figure 1), similar to but perhaps slightly more specific than Willmar Sauter’s generic model in the previous section of this *Introduction*. The star (★) in the centre represents the festival event, while the ‘forces’ identified around the periphery of the model may be seen as representing specific (at times overlapping and/or interlinked) sub-systems or domains that impact on the festival event:

*Figure 1: The parameters of a (cultural/arts) festival*



Naturally what we have here are only *some* of the possible factors and forces which may have a distinct impact on, and influence decision-making about, and the practice of, specific festivals – it would be quite possible to expand on the list of items. However, limited as it is, the diagram does seem to suggest that any festival event is necessarily a complex matter, and that controlling the aim and focus of such a festival – seen as a single event or eventifying process – would be immensely difficult. For one, there is bound to be a strong potential for disagreement and disunity between the various forces, particularly if they are unequally balanced in terms of issues such as power, prestige, perceived importance and/or public support.

However, difficult as it may appear, it is not an impossibility, for one would naturally also argue (theoretically at least) that there may be an equally strong potential for success should the central focus (★) be managed and maintained in such a way as to mobilise all the constituting elements in one event for the good of the event as a whole.

In this respect, I would like to identify three qualities of the model which seem to me to play vital roles in some of the festivalisation processes described in this book.

1. Any festival is subject to *all* these forces, though they may not carry equal weight in the processes or have an equal impact on the particular festival. It is a fact that no festival can take place without the (voluntary or forced) cooperation between all the above-mentioned forces, and, as a result of this participation, each one of these participants has both rights and privileges in terms of participation in the total event. (You cannot, for example, argue that the town in which a festival takes place has no say in the nature of the festival – nor its citizens, its business people, its moral and political leaders, etc. By the same token the town cannot argue that the national sponsors, where such exist (e.g. an international soft drinks company or a national media company), have no say in what is put on and where and when. A great deal of the inevitable rancour and wrangling surrounding festivals often arise from issues surrounding the perceived rights of the various participants.
2. Arising from the previous point, it follows that the forces/fields listed in the model all (potentially) play a role in the making of the event, but they have a particular relationship to each other in

the process, and – depending on the nature of the particular festival – the weight they carry will vary from festival to festival. It is in fact the weight that the individual forces carry and the power-relationship between the various forces in the festival which determine the core nature of that particular event. (One could also view it the other way round: the specific nature of the festival determines the weight and relationship between the various participants and forces involved in the festival or event.) A comparative look at any contrasting festivals would illustrate the point. (See for example Hauptfleisch in this volume, pp. 79-96)

3. Given its structure, every festival of necessity has multiple aims and expectations – of which local expectations (e.g. ceremonial celebrations surrounding historical, social, cultural, political and religious events and issues, as well as socio-economic issues such as publicity, tourism, job creation, generation of income and the cultural development of the local populace) would normally have precedence. This of course means that no single festival can be a representation (or clone) of the abstract (metropolitan) cultural industry, for it is strongly rooted in its local identity. (In other words, in South Africa a festival in Cape Town is primarily an expression of values and expectations held by Cape Town residents, and would differ substantially from a similar festival in Grahamstown, Pretoria or Durban – even if the plays put on were the same. The nature of the particular festival *as event* is unique. And this would be equally true, one suspects, of festivals in Edinburgh, Lyons, London, Sydney, Singapore, New York, Salzburg, or Prague).

Given these forces, it clearly becomes a matter of some difficulty for any organiser or organisation to really control a festival, to maintain its focus on the central aim. This is amply demonstrated by the programmes of the various festivals, also those discussed in this book.<sup>4</sup>

The fact is of course that a festival – in order to truly be a festive event – must ultimately be true to its basic nature. As Willmar Sauter (2004, pp.3-14) points out, the fundamental origins of the festival lie in the existence of a *playing culture*, and the nature of the playing culture will determine (or at least significantly affect) the nature of the individual festival, the way it originates and is run. To

participate in a festival means to laugh, sing and party, as one would at a bazaar or fête, for it is a gathering of people with shared interests – and if they share similar values (e.g. regarding arts, culture, language, religion and so on), so much the better. How such an event will be managed and used by people, organisations and structures is something they cannot wholly control, for much of it is not to be managed – it simply happens.<sup>5</sup> As life does.

The fact that significant art *is* made and/or offered at most festivals, that people have memorable aesthetic experiences, that the nature and quality of art and cultural products are debated, and so on, are exceptional and highly valued moments, but not the norm, not something anyone can (or ever could) really predict, plan for, or manage. The only thing any manager of a festival (with all his/her consultants, boards, advisors, sponsors, support staff, and so on) can really do is to create the opportunity for people to play by bringing together the players and the audiences in a festive space.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The terms *eventify*, *eventified* and *eventification* were first coined in 1999 by Temple Hauptfleisch in a contribution written for the IFTR Working Group on *The Theatrical Event*, then reworked for the IFTR conference in Lyon in 2000. The final article, entitled ‘Eventification: Utilizing the theatrical system to frame the event’, by Temple Hauptfleisch was published in *Theatrical Events – Borders Dynamics Frames*. (Eds Vicki Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans van Maanen, Willmar Sauter and John Tulloch). Rodopi Publishers, Amsterdam, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For my purposes here a life event is any social event which can be seen to have performative qualities (at minimum performers in a performance space before onlookers/an audience.) A church service, a wedding, a baptism ceremony, a public hanging, a football match, a war – they are all framed events in some way. But they are not (yet) theatrical events, though they may be framed and ‘read’ that way. The theories of Erving Goffman, Elizabeth Burns, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner all utilise this notion of framing an event as performative, as does the work being done by the *IFTR Working Group on the Theatrical Event*.

<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, for example, these include the 1938 symbolic ox-wagon trek, the 1952 “founder’s day” celebrations, the *Van Riebeeck Festival* and the 1994 inauguration of Nelson Mandela which ushered in the “new South Africa”.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in South Africa there are 11 official languages, but the key ones at most festivals are either Afrikaans (a locally developed Germanic language – based on Dutch, but influenced by indigenous Khoi-San and Bantu, and colonial European and Asian languages) or English. However, one finds Afrikaans productions at the Grahamstown festival from the early years, despite its ostensible aim of promoting English culture, and *vice versa*, there are the many English (or multilingual)



productions at the Afrikaans festivals, despite their clear focus on promoting the Afrikaans culture (= the Afrikaans language). Yet none of the festivals have lost their impact in their chosen fields of cultural promotion – they simply do not control the fields, but appear to me to be controlled by the fields. Which, given the way language and culture is made, may not be a bad thing at all. (More of this in the chapter by Hauptfleisch further on.)

<sup>5</sup> This facet has its irritating problems, of course, problems which in a way reinforce the argument: if wine and cheese (or beer and a barbecue) are typical of a region, how can one expect that it would not become part of the festivities of a local festival? (For example, if the festival is patronised by many teenagers, how can one escape the pop concerts and discotheques? If the festival-goers are drawn from people whose normal pleasures consist of watching sport and TV, how can you expect them to possess the theatre etiquette expected of the urban theatre-goer? And so on)

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